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LEAN LIBRARY COMMUNICATION : MIND THE CUSTOMER

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Abstract

Academic libraries have been discovering communication as an important organizational process. Communication seems to be a relevant and important factor to connect with library customers, and - as a result - to involve and to captivate library customers. However, academic libraries tend to fail in organizing communication processes in a customer oriented way. This is most visible in the use of a wide range of (technology enhanced) communication channels like – for example - social media. This behavior is risky because of probably wrong choices, the waste of valuable resources and forget what library customers want. In this research is investigated how academic libraries should organize communication processes in a customer oriented way. The research has been carried out by a literature study about communication processes, communications channels and effective communication. In the empirical part a group of University students were asked to respond to a survey about their communication preferences with an academic library. Results show that students prefer to communicate face-to-face, e-mail, or simply check the library's website.

Keywords: Academic libraries, Communication process, Communication channels, Lean

Introduction:

Academic libraries have been discovering communication as an important organizational process. Communication seems to be a relevant and important factor to connect with library patrons, and - as a result - to involve and to captivate our patrons. Communication is the process in which ideas, opinions and information are transferred from sender to receiver. Communication channels are used in this process as a mode of transfer ideas, opinions and information to the receiver. Examples of communication channels: face-to-face, telephone and e-mail. Technological developments have caused the birth of a new communication channel: social media. Social media (Twitter, LinkedIn; Facebook) are nowadays embraced by libraries

and widely adopted into library communications. However, there are serious doubts about the effectiveness of social media as a communication channel for academic libraries: earlier research (Brockhoff, 2012) shows evidence that customers are not very interested in the use of social media as a mean of communication with the library. As a result social media are not an effective communication channel for academic libraries. The message (ideas, opinions and information) from the sender (hence: the library) will not reach the receiver (hence: the library customer). Besides the use of communication channels which not fit customers, academic libraries tend to use a very broad range of channels. This will work confusing for customers and can be a waste of valuable library resources. As a result the library communication process must be considered as not effective, hence: not lean. The concept of lean (Huber, 2011) incorporates organizational goals which are in regard of improvement of customer orientation. So a main research question arises: how should academic libraries organize their communication processes in a customer orientated way?

Literature Review:

To investigate the research question a literature review has been conducted on the communication process, communication channels, effective communication and the use of communication channels by libraries. Furthermore it was investigated which communication channels library patrons would prefer in communication with the library.

Communication process

Communication is an all day part of human behavior (Blundel, 2004). When we communicate, we will do that with a certain goal in mind. As human beings we will try to turn our ideas, opinions and information into a message that will send to a human target. This phenomenon is called the process of communication. Communication takes place between the person who wants to spread something (called: sender) and the person for whom it is intended (called: receiver). The ideas, opinions and information are packed in a message. Any message must be brought from the sender to the receiver. This can be done in many ways, e.g., through an article, a book, a video, face-to-face, an exhibition, a newspaper article. So there must be a channel that carries the message and transports it from sender to receiver. Without a channel there will be no communication. The receiver can respond to the message by giving a reaction (called: feedback). The communication process and the central position of Channels is shown in Figure 1.

Communication channels

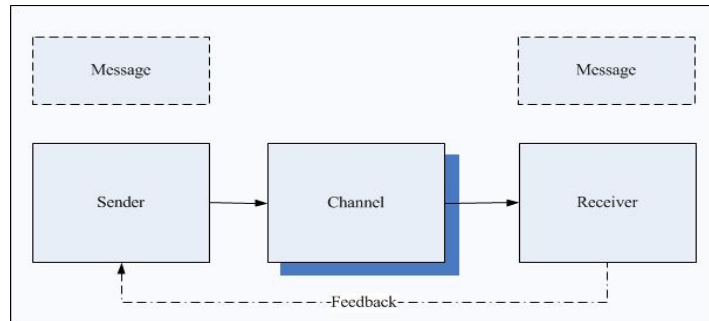


Figure 1: Communication Process (After Blundel, 2004)

In the communication literature the choice of communication channels is considered (Blundel, 2004; Rogers, 2010) as an essential step in the process of communication. The choice of the channel by the sender must fit the needs, habits and mindset of the receiver. If this is not the case it is very likely that the message will be lost. An indication of a lost message is any reaction (feedback) failed to appear. This failure can be seen as an indicator for an ineffective communication process.

Effective Communication

Communication literature (Blundel, 2004; Rogers, 2010) describes the results of the communication process as effective or ineffective. An ineffective process means that the message has been lost, was not received, not seen, ignored or not correctly understood. But how the rate of effectiveness could be measured is not clearly described in the literature. However, some recommendations are given to stimulate the effectiveness of the communication process. Blundel (2004) proposes that the sender should take action in case no reaction (feedback) has been received within a reasonable time. This can be seen as a check (by the sender) at the address of the receiver if the message was whether received or not and (correctly) understood. If this check is incorporated in the communication process, this is called the double-loop communication process, as shown in Figure 2.

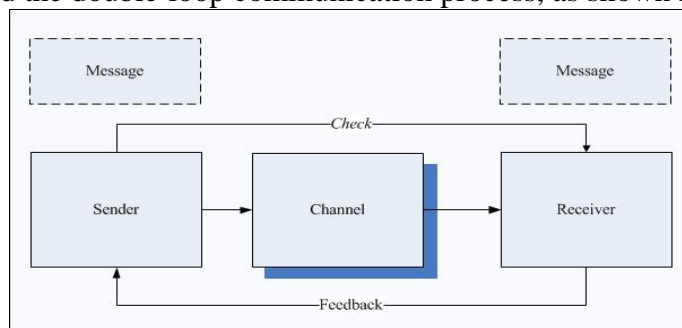


Figure 2: Double-loop Communication Process

According to Brockerhoff (2012) this check is often forgotten by senders. As a result the sender should aim for a double-loop communication process. The double-loop has implementations for the choice of communication channels. Brockerhoff (2012) states that the face-to-face channel is particularly interesting for implementing the double-loop communication process. Also Rogers (2010) prefers the face-to-face channel because of the same reason as Brockerhoff (2012) does: the possibility of asking feedback on the spot, in the context of physical presence with a receiver. A reaction will be most likely in this context which means the communion process will be effectively. As a conclusion the sender should aim for a double loop communication process in combination with the Face-to-face channel. A double loop communication process can also be considered as lean because of the customer oriented focus involved.

Academic libraries and Lean Communication

Gardner and Eng (2005) report that communication is becoming increasingly important in higher education. Important reasons for this trend are increasing complexity, decreasing contact hours and more project work. The need and necessity of communication have thus increased. For libraries - active in an educational environment – seem to copy this trend. Academic libraries communicate more (Chalmers, Liedtka & Bednar, 2006) with their patrons, and use a broad variety of channels. This is supported by the research of Williams (2011). There is also evidence of a great diversity in the use of channels, social media, chat, sms, mobile applications, Etc... Another study by Martins, Cortes & Graça (2012) shows the use of more than ten communication channels used by an academic library. These amounts of channels used in an organizational context are far too much according to Rogers (2010) and will work out ineffectively and confusing for customers. Brockerhoff (2012) makes it clear that in the context of a library the face-to-face channel is more efficient than other channels. The particular reason is because of the double-loop communication process which can directly proceed within the physical presence of the library customer.

Results of the literature review show - firstly - that an optimal choice of channels is considered as a leverage for effective communication: only those channels should be chosen which are already in use by the patron. This is effective because it can be expected that the message will reach the customer. In this regard of effectiveness the face-to-face channel should be chosen as a channel of choice. This because of the possibilities for the double-loop communication process. Therefore library staff with dedicated communication tasks (for example: liaisons) should not hesitate to prefer face-to-face contacts with their customers. Secondly – libraries tend to use a wide range of communication channels. In literature the use of a wide range

of channels is considered to be risky: a wide range of channels works confusing for customers and might be difficult to control and manage.

As a result communication processes of academic libraries should be strongly considered as not lean because of failing the double-loop, the use of too many communication channels and use of the wrong communication channels. This because of a lack of customer orientation: what would prefer library customers in regard of communication with the library? This question was – however - not answered by the literature review: which communication channels use library patrons in daily life, and which would they prefer in their communications with the library?

Method:

To investigate the latter aspect more deeply the empirical part of this research consisted of a survey. The survey included questions on use of channels and communicational preferences, in daily life and as a library patron. As potential respondents students of the Faculty of Economics and Business / Spatial Sciences [University of Groningen] were selected. The total population (N) was 7.100 students on 1st September 2013. The survey was made available to the students via the Electronic Learning Environment of the University of Groningen. All students (Bachelor and Master) received an e-mail with an invitation to respond to the survey. A reminder was send a week after the first invitation. A description of the respondent group (n=42) is shown in table 1 (by Faculty, Gender and Programme) and figure 3 (by ages).

Table 1: Respondents (n=42) after Faculty, Gender and Programme

Faculty		Gender		Programme	
<i>Economy & Business</i>	<i>Spatial Sciences</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Bachelor</i>	<i>Master</i>
37	5	18	24	23	19

In Figure 3 the respondents (n=42) are shown by their ages.

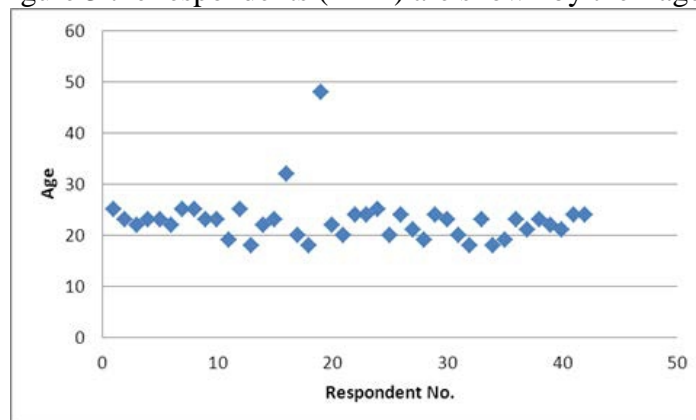


Figure 3: Respondents (n=42) by ages

Discussion:

The results show that respondents (n=42) use a broad variety of media in daily life. Particularly important are e-mail, website and SMS. Respondents tend to use social media more and more. The use of the telephone seems – however - to decline. Figure 4 shows a detailed overview of use of channels by patrons in daily life.

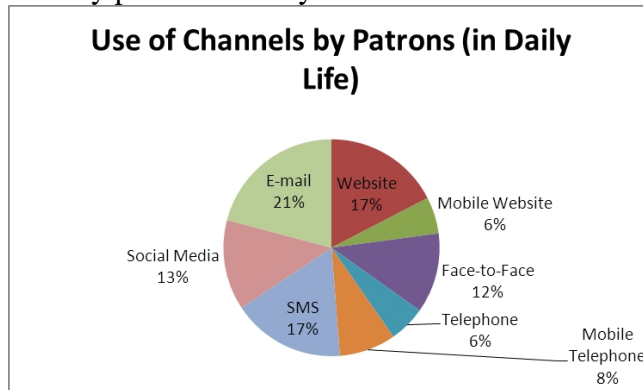


Figure 4: Use of Channels by Patrons (in Daily Life)

In communication with the library respondents use e-mail, website and face-to-face. In this regard the respondents prefer no other communication channels.

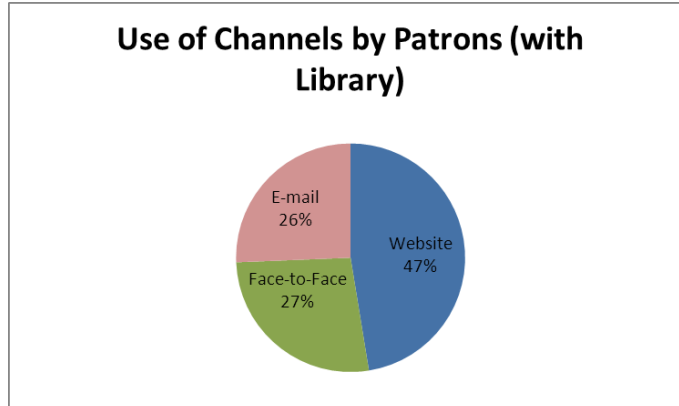


Figure 5: Use of Channels by Patrons (with Library)

Respondents show different habits in using channels in daily life and for communication with the library. In daily life there is a wide variety in channels used and preferred by the respondents. In contradiction: behaving as library patrons the respondents use and prefer a restricted amount of channels. However, the (effective) face-to-channel is present in this regard.

Between female and male respondents there are little differences in the use of channels in daily life. Males seem to have a slight preference for channels like E-mail and mobile websites. However, females seem to have a

clear preference for the face-to-face channel, compared with male respondents. Figure 6 shows the distribution after gender in the use of channels in daily life.

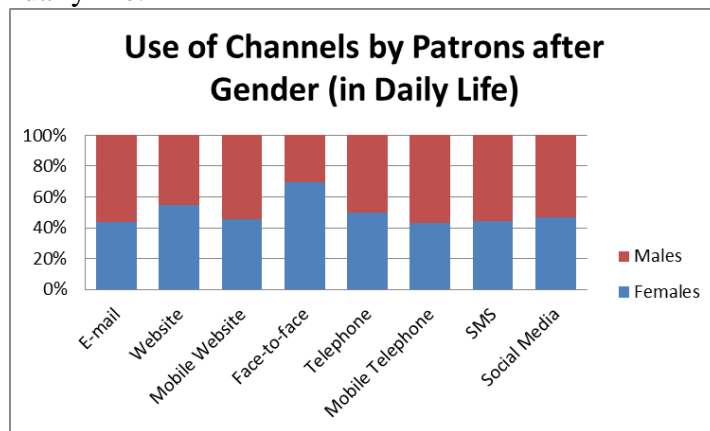


Figure 6: Use of Channels by Patrons after Gender (in Daily Life)

In communication with the library female respondents seem to have a stronger preference for the face-to-face channel compared with male respondents. Figure 7 shows the use of channels with the Library and distribution after gender.

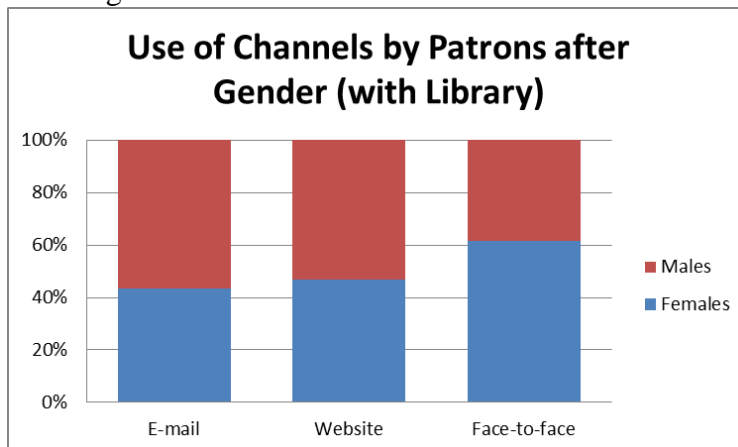


Figure 7: Use of Channels by Patrons after Gender (with Library)

The findings of this research may cause a reflection on library communication policy and processes: libraries tend to use a broad range of communication media. Customers use and prefer – however – just a few media. From a customer orientated view it is therefore strongly recommended to investigate three important questions as an academic library: 1) As a library: do we take talking face-to-face enough seriously with our library customers? 2) Are there any communication channels which

library customer prefer (but not used by the library)? 3) What are reasons to use channels which are not preferred by our patrons?

Conclusion:

Despite all the turmoil it seems face-to-face communication is not dead yet when it's about library communication, and – frankly – will it ever? As a result academic libraries show risky behavior when it is about organizing their communication processes in a not customer-oriented way. Technology has enhanced a lot of new possibilities and choices in regard of communication channels. However, many of these possibilities showed out in this research as not effective because customers will not use these in regard of the library. This a first lack in customer orientation of the academic library. A second lack is an unfortunate trend to forget the value of the face-to-face communication channel. This channel can be highly effective if a double-loop is included in the communication process. And furthermore the research done shows that library customers do want to use this channel. As a result, face-to-face library services are not old school. The emerging trend of librarians as liaisons is also a sign of re-valuing face-to-face communication processes.

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